

# Douglas Faust Blackledge

*Douglas Faust Blackledge was the best of us. Doug had it all – charm, sense of humor, great intellect and athletic ability, love of animals and children, all behind a winning smile. Retired USAF LtCol and HH-60G Pave Hawk Helicopter Pilot. Combat Search and Rescue Warrior who was working on his Masters Degree in Finance when he left this world. Contrarian and Daedalian. We will treasure our memories.*

A few years ago during one of Doug's rare visits 'home' to Stalgren Ct, I was driving Doug and Bonnie down Zuni Rd in Albuquerque when we passed a small restaurant. "Huh!" I heard Doug's voice from the back seat. "Mi Casita – I wonder what that means?" There was a nanosecond of silence followed by an explosion of laughter from both Doug and me. Bonnie looked at us in amazement. I had to explain:

When Helen and I were raising the boys in Albuquerque, one of our favorite Mexican Restaurants was Mi Casita. In my continuing effort to educate the boys anyway I could think of, I had all four of us sing (over and over) as we drove to the restaurant:

*Mi Casita, Mi Casita! My little house! My little house!*

We must have sung that ditty 800 times in the eight years of Doug's ABQ childhood; it was so engrained that I'm sure David would probably be singing it to his kids today if the restaurant had not gone out of business a year or so ago. The interchange perfectly captured Doug's sense of humor, and perhaps some of his bitter-sweet memories of Life Within the Blackledge Family.

Doug's memories did not begin with Albuquerque – as he himself recalled in his autobiography:

I am the number one son of the number one son of the Captain. My Grand Dad, Captain Alan Blackledge, USNA Class of 1920, was the patriarch of his family, with 5 children. They all wanted to be the best for the Captain, which always led to intense (but loving) rivalry amongst the siblings. Unfortunately for the 3 oldest siblings, they were not boys. They immediately lost that competition once my Dad was born.

And so, the legacy continued. My Dad, USNA Class of 1963, had a full 20 year career as an Air Force officer (he saw the light and cross commissioned out of Annapolis). He met my mom as a young lieutenant, and I was eventually born to them while my dad was teaching, ironically, at the U.S. Air Force Academy that would become my Alma Mater nearly 22 years later.

Doug was born on Bastille Day, 14 July 1970, indeed at the Air Force Academy. I was assigned to teach at the Dept of Mathematics there in the summer of 1968, one of the most enjoyable assignments we had. When I was assigned to Southeast Asia in the Fall of 1972, Helen took Doug to the Ranch in Glenwood, NM. There he grew

up with his cousins to include two who shared his birth year: Shane Faust and Hugh Faust. Helen worked part-time at the Blue Front Saloon, and Doug enjoyed a idyllic life.

When I returned from Thailand, I was amazed at how much Doug had advanced in that 6-month period. He was speaking in complete sentences – or perhaps I should say complete questions. Everything was a question. As we traveled across country from the Ranch to Virginia (our new assignment was the pentagon), I recall stopping at one gas station and taking Doug to the restroom. He looked at the height of the urinals and asked, “Why are these for giants?”

In Virginia, we lived for almost 3 months with my sister Barbara and her husband Jack Tipton in Falls Church. Jack was learning a new skill after Air Force retirement, and we ended up purchasing our new home via him and his partner Al Brazille<sup>1</sup> of the Foggy Bottom Real Estate Company. Our new home was one previously owned by a landscape architect who worked for civil service and had done a great deal of work on their home on Leeswood Drive in Alexandria, VA in the Rose Hill subdivision. What a great deal! The back yard was so special that each spring we held an Azalea Viewing party; not only the azaleas but the dogwoods were in full bloom and setting off the pond with goldfish and tadpoles we had collected at the National Arboretum. Was that legal? No, but the statute of limitations has passed as those tadpoles have turned into giant bullfrogs and had tadpoles of their own.

*He was the best of us.* I wrote those words in February 2016 after receiving the phone call informing me that the Brevard County Sheriff’s Office had found Doug deceased in his recliner in his home in Melbourne, Florida. His loyal dog Tyson was at his side. “No evidence of suicide or foul play,” they reported. “The body has apparently been there for some time.”

The Medical Examiner’s report came back: *Cause of death: Fatty liver.* Wait, what? How can a strong 45-year old from a fatty liver? Bonnie’s cousin Dr. Kenneth Hirsch

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<sup>1</sup> Al Brazille was said to be one of the Seven Blocks of Granite, the legendary Fordham University offensive line, but he was not of the most famous 1936 variety.

had served as a Medical Examiner for the Air Force for some time in San Francisco, and provided some explanation and closure:

*I did over 2000 autopsies at the San Francisco Coroner's office in the late '60s when I was a pathology resident at University of California in San Francisco. At autopsy, I would often see otherwise healthy people who had died suddenly at home, and the only finding at autopsy was an enlarged fatty liver. Under the microscope however, the blood vessels in the lungs were clogged with fat. When that happens, the blood cannot get to the lungs to exchange the carbon dioxide that the red blood cells are carrying for oxygen to carry back to all the organs in the body. The process is called fat embolism, and behaves exactly like pulmonary embolism, when a blood clot clogs the pulmonary arteries instead of fat. The result is the same - the person's heart is beating and they are breathing, but no blood is getting to the lungs, so they essentially suffocate and die. Apparently, as the liver cells are dying, they release the fat which then travels via the blood to the heart and gets pumped into the lungs, where it clogs the pulmonary arteries.*

*As far as the cause of fatty liver - when all the liver cells fill with fat and therefore cannot efficiently detoxify the blood coming from the intestines and lower body, they die. That is usually seen in starvation and/ or more often in acute alcohol poisoning or alcoholism. Some chemicals, like carbon tetrachloride can also cause it.*

Thus this was not unusual.